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The Legacy of the 'Appropriator'

—*Sukriti Ghosal*

THE critical theories of Oscar Wilde are generally underrated for being thoroughly derivative. In reviewing *Intentions,* the volume of major critical essays by Wilde, Arthur Symons ironically remarks that Wilde 'is always original in his quotations' (*CH* 96). Whistler's verdict is that Wilde 'has the courage of the opinions — of others' (*SL* 66). This view that Wilde is but a witty synthesizer of other men's ideas, has even been endorsed by Prof. René Wellek to whom Wilde, despite his brilliance, is but a 'propagandist for ideas of his predecessors' *(HMC* 409). True, Wilde came under the influence of many of his critical predecessors, especially Arnold and Pater. But my contention is that, notwithstanding his notoriety as a critical plagiarist, as a theorist Wilde is original enough to influence his critical epigones.

A plausible psychological interpretation of this attitude is in terms of 'the anxiety of influence'. Harold Bloom demonstrates how strong poets, compelled to define their own originality against the overriding achievement of their predecessors, suffer from 'anxiety of indebtedness' (*AI* 5) which often manifests itself in the form of deliberate misreading of their precursors. For most modern critics, such an 'anxious (involuntary) reaction' to Wilde seems unlikely because to the late 20th century critics Wilde is but part of a tradition. Incidentally, ideas imbibed from a tradition are not generally treated as influence, for the term at least partly 'conceals and mitigates the guilty acquisition of talent' (*ED* 3). However, in T.S. Eliot there is much uneasy

reaction to Wilde probably because most of his critical dicta have been drawn upon Wilde's ideas.

Specks of influential anxiety and consequent intentional misreading are too conspicuous in Eliot to be overlooked. In his essay 'Arnold and Pater', by way of defining aestheticism Eliot observes : 'If we wish to understand painting, we do not go to Oscar Wilde' (*SE* 400). In the same essay Eliot sneeringly mentions Wilde's *De Profundis* as a work exemplifying the objectionable equation of Religion and Art, an equation inspired by Arnold's theory of culture which strips religion of faith. However, Eliot's theoretical dismissal of Wilde is belied by his critical practice where he appropriates many of Wilde's seminal ideas oftener than known. The idea of tradition is undeniably the cornerstone of Eliotean aesthetics. Tradition, according to Eliot, involves a 'historical sense' — 'a perception, not only of the pastness of the past but its presence' (*SE* 14). Eliot criticises the defiance of convention in the name of originality and asserts that the best part of a work is that 'in which the dead poets...assert their immortality most vigorously' (*SE* 14). Eliot here but smartly rephrases Wilde's insistence on the artist's having, supratemporal consciousness :

> ...he to whom the present is the only thing that is present knows nothing of the age in which he lives. To realize the nineteenth century, one must realize every century that has preceded it and that has contributed to its making (*CW* 1040).

Again, Wilde stresses the importance of critical faculty in creation :

> For it is critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself.... The mere creative instinct does not innovate, but reproduces (*CW* 1021).

Eliot too asserts that if tradition is nothing better than blind adherence to what has gone before, it should positively be discouraged : '...novelty is better than repetition' (*SE* 14). The phrasal affinity is too close to be merely adventitious.

As a critic Eliot espouses the impersonality of art emotions and emphasizes the need for alchemizing personal emotions into poetic artifacts :

> Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, personality (*SE* 20).

Wilde's view in this regard is so strikingly identical with Eliot's that the latter seems to have used the former as his main source. In his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde presents his view epigrammatically : 'To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim' (*CW* 17). In 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' he spells out his conviction about the impersonality of art emotion more wittily :

> To call an artist morbid because he deals with morbidity as his subject matter is as silly as if one called Shakespeare mad because he wrote *King Lear (CW* 1093).

It is interesting to note that Eliot through his catalyst — analogy argues for absolute, even mechanical, impersonality of treatment. Wilde, however, has the critical sanity to see that impersonality is at best 'intellectual'. Since art springs from personality, the most impersonal characters, he rightly maintains, are 'the poets themselves not *as they thought they were,* but *as they thought they, were not'* (*CW* 1045). Since 'out of ourselves we can never pass', 'the man who suffers and the mind which creates', *pace* Eliot, can never be 'completely separate' even in the most perfect artist, except, of course, in some wished — for way.

Ian Small in an article shows that in modern criticism one finds an increasing attenuation of the representational values of art : 'the more modernist a text, the more self-consciously artefactual it is' (*BJA* 50). The text is no longer looked upon as a transparent glass-window opening on reality but rather as a stained glass, 'meant to be looked *at,* rather than *through*' (*ICCT* 12). Almost a century before this we find Wilde contesting the reflective theory of art in 'The Decay of Lying' : 'Art finds her

own perfection within, and not outside of, herself.... She is a veil rather than a mirror' (*CW* 982). In a letter to More Adey he further claims that 'Art is not a mirror but a crystal. It creates its own shapes and forms' (*SL* 415). Modern art, again, is not an art of vision, but rather an art of revision. W.B. Yeats, like Flaubert, is unwilling to take the poet as an inspired author transcribing telepathically the aesthetic dictations of the Muse. In his poem 'Adam's Curse' he beautifully verbalises this modernist postulate with a metaphor of stitching :

> A line will take us hours maybe;
> Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
> Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

Long before Yeats Wilde would dislodge the inspirational theory of literary creation. He strongly holds that 'practice must precede perfection' (*CW* 972) and reminds us that 'there are moments when Art almost attains to the dignity of manual labour' (*CW* 220).

As a theorist T.S. Eliot endeavours to shift the critical focus from the poet to the work. In the Preface to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood,* he asserts that 'a poem, in some sense has its own life; ...that the feeling, or emotion, or vision resulting from a poem is something different from the feeling or emotion or vision in the mind of the poet' (*SW* x). The critical premise involved here has long been anticipated by Wilde :

> For when a work is finished it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say (*CW* 1024).

It's a pity that J.C. Ransom traces this New Critical idea to Richards and Eliot but ignores Wilde who, however, had fought for views by which Eliot won a name for himself.

Wilde's, and later Eliot's, suggestion that a poem may imply something unintended by the poet, contains the seed of the 'intentional fallacy' propounded by Wimsatt and Beardsley. They argue that since 'the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard' for judging his literary

merit, what the poet set out to do is immaterial (*TCLC* 334). There is an unambiguous prefiguration of this critical principle in *Intentions*. In 'The Critic as Artist' Wilde avers that criticism does not confine itself 'to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final' (*CW* 1029). That this is not just a passing remark is evident from what he further notes in *De Profundis* written three years before his death : 'in art good intentions are not of the smallest value. All bad art is the result of good intentions' (*SL* 223).

The dynamics of Wilde criticism also embodies some of the basic Post-Structuralist doctrines. The New Critics while questioning the authorial intention, read the text in terms of fixed formula — be it of 'irony', 'paradox' (Wimsatt) or 'ambiguity' (Empson) or 'tension' (Tate). However ingenious the interpretation, each of these approaches reduces the 'heterogeneity of texts into a version of the author's (complex) self' (*PD* 6), what R.S. Crane describes as the 'bankruptcy of critical monism'. Eminent Post-Structuralists like Roland Barthes, therefore speak about the 'irreducible' plurality of signification (*RL* 53-54). Strange though it may sound, we find a clear anticipation of this unorthodox view of interpretation in the writings of Oscar Wilde. In 'The Critic as Artist' he states that to the critic art is not the 'riddling Sphinx' whose questions may be answered. It rather is an undecipherable mystery, a mode of expression whose imaginative beauty makes all interpretations true, and no interpretation final' (*CW* 1031). Wilde here accepts music as 'the perfect type of art', for its 'secret' is inexhaustible, and concludes : 'It is through its very incompleteness that Art becomes complete in beauty' (*CW* 1031).

Another significant change found in Post-Structuralist poetics is the primacy of the reader. Pre-modern aesthetics is too much author-centred. The filial obligation is so strong here that most critics fret themselves sick to grasp the author's meaning. In modern poetics the attention veers from the author to the work. But in Post-Structuralist critical theory the thrust swerves to the reader. The Post-Structuralists think that unlike a work which has

a spatial existence, a text is a methodological field which emerges only when the work comes in contact with the reader's consciousness. The reader's role here is pivotal, for he is not to consume the text but to produce or co-author the text (*RL* 54). The reader, thus, becomes the true author of this joint construct. Even in respect of the reader's pre-eminence in the generation of meaning, Wilde pioneers the modern critics. In 'The Critic as Artist' he first puts his point tentatively : '...the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it as it was in his soul who wrought it'. Then modifying his opinion he makes a claim untypical of a Victorian: 'Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings and makes it marvellous for us...' (*CW* 1029). The emphasis-switch, which struck the Victorians as preposterous convinces us of the profundity of Wilde's critical insight which has taken about a century to be formulated into a theory.

Evidently, Oscar Wilde is not an 'intellectual of attitudes' (*SOW* 47) or an eccentric theorist who delights in juggling with critical platitudes. True, his style is too repetitive, too digressive, too elusive. But a serious reading of his criticism will reveal that Oscar Wilde is seldom wayward in his judgement. Wilde's critical principles are always well ahead of his time and far from being an appropriator, he is the fountainhead of many key-tenets of modern criticism.

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